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Visual anthropology as a discipline of words. On the importance of the verbal in visual archives

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Posted at the Zurich Open Repository and Archive, University of Zurich

ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-65533>

Journal Article

Published Version

Originally published at:

Thurnherr, Christof (2012). Visual anthropology as a discipline of words. On the importance of the verbal in visual archives. Newsletter, (61):32-33.

Visual anthropology as a discipline of words



Paul Hockings' *Principles of Visual Anthropology* opened with Margaret Mead's article 'Visual Anthropology in a Discipline of Words'. In her prefatory lines Mead lamented that too many research projects "insist on continuing the hopelessly inadequate note-taking of an earlier age."¹ Today, some forty years after the first publication of Mead's text, the opposition of the verbal and the visual still seems to loom over the full acceptance of the visual in cultural anthropology.

Christof Thurnherr

WHILE TRADITIONALISTS seem to lay more stress on the verbal, supporters of technologically more inclusive ways of doing anthropology tend to disproportionately favor the visual. This paper attempts to take a stand for the middle ground by arguing for a joint application of both the verbal and the visual. It calls attention to the fact that one cannot sensibly be of use without the other. Even in visually based research the pencil remains an indispensable tool.

While it seems to be widely acknowledged that certain topics can hardly be studied without using visual instruments, the analysis of visual data is hardly feasible without recourse to auxiliary information. A common scene where the anthropological analysis of visual data occurs – and thereby where the absence of additional information is often just too painfully noticed – is the photographic archive. By analyzing the archival work with photography some guiding principles may be deduced, which may help to structure the contemporary engagement with photography in anthropology.

The text at hand will firstly delineate the theoretical background by situating archival work within the field of visual anthropology. Secondly, an experimental research process in the photographic archive of the Ethnographic Museum of the University of Zurich will be described. The effect of this experience will, thirdly, be applied to a series of contemporary photographs from Afghanistan selected to accompany this article. This practical example could lead to useful conclusions for the treatment of photography in contemporary anthropology.

Anthropology and photography – a strategic alliance

According to a widely accepted definition, the scientific endeavor consists in the answering of questions.²

The questions to be asked in anthropology seem only to be limited by the means by which the researcher tries to converge onto a chosen topic. Certain questions can hardly be researched verbally, either because they do not surface by verbal inquiry or because they cannot be grasped and described with words. The first kind might consist of data that surfaces by the visual stimulation of an informant, for example, in the form of photo elicitation where the discussion of a photograph yields answers to questions that the anthropologist would not have asked.³ The second variety might concern data that is not easily discerned or communicated, such as movement, position and posture. In these instances visual tools help to record and communicate data.

Photography can thus be understood as a part of an extended anthropological methodology. Yet, disregarding the relevance as an anthropological method or tool to obtain or record data, photography can play another role in the sense that it can constitute the object of anthropological inquiry. Photography can be seen as the material result of cultural practice; it is not the medium, but the expression of anthropological information.⁴ Any beneficial discussion of photography in anthropology – be they freshly made or drawn from archives – should preferably take these possibilities into account.

Having situated the archival work with photography within the broader confines of visual anthropology it is possible to briefly brush on epistemological debates on the visual in anthropology. Although the scope of the article at hand does not allow us to delve deeply into the matter, the disclosure of some of the constitutive postulates is necessary as a foundation for the subsequent theoretical deductions. The first one concerns the relationship of photography to reality. Many early theoreticians assumed that a photograph is the mechanical reproduction of reality (see e.g., Mead 2003 [1974]). As has been stated convincingly since then, this is not the case.⁵ One of the more obvious explanations for this shift of paradigm is the fact that photographic images involve a considerable amount of interpretation in production, as well as in collection and in analysis. Another reason not to imply that a photograph reveals certain facts is that it will only give the answer to the question being asked, which depends to a high degree on the viewer and his or her research agenda; any viewer can infer different meanings.⁶ Since the receiver of this (visual) communication plays such an important part, the meaning that is transported by visual means can only be controlled by its producer to a certain extent. Furthermore, archivists do not only *collect* data – they also play a constitutive role in the creation of meaning.⁷

Photography in anthropological archives – then and now

Anthropology was quick in valuing the potential of photography. As many an early traveler embraced the new technology almost immediately after its invention, the desire for storage and arrangement of this new form of information could be met by ethnographic collections, which was often collectively operated with a venue for exhibition, namely the museum.

In Zurich, Director of the Ethnographic Museum Prof. Dr Hans Wehrli, as had been done in many other places, seized the opportunity as early as 1917 to complement the ethnographic collection of objects with a library and a photographic archive.⁸

While it seems to be widely acknowledged that certain topics can hardly be studied without using visual instruments, the analysis of visual data is hardly feasible without recourse to auxiliary information.

Today, this early initiative has grown to a collection of more than 40,000 photographs, which are continually being researched. Apart from the vast majority of historical photographs in the collection, the Ethnographic Museum has in the last two decades re-launched the effort to focus on contemporary visual anthropological output. Part of this program is an extended curriculum in visual anthropology which teaches students to research by focusing on, or including, the visual.

One result of this curriculum is my own research in Afghanistan which was conducted between September 2003 and April 2006. It consisted of two fieldtrips totaling ten months.⁹ The photographic collection of this project, the vast majority of which was produced during the first exploratory fieldtrip in September-November 2003, can be described according to different sets of criteria. While a technical description does not seem to lead to considerable problems, any further attempts to give more information about the content of the collection appears more demanding. In order to find out some of the elementary principles guiding the existing material in the photographic archive of the Ethnographic Museum of the University of Zurich, recent research on a similar topic was conducted.

Looking for Afghanistan – to no avail?

A search for the word 'Afghanistan', in the database of the photographic archive of the Ethnographic Museum of the University of Zurich, yields no results. A second attempt searches the word 'Pakistan'. (The neighboring countries Afghanistan and Pakistan share a common border of considerable length whose present-day course is still controversial. Any geographical denomination concerning such disputed areas and unambiguously deciding in favor of one side or the other could be wrong and must therefore be considered with care.) This second search produces six references, which are subsequently analyzed in detail. The preliminary revision of the 246 images shows a total of 242 with landscapes and views or details of immovable constructions (such as towns, buildings, temples, dams and bridges). Although these manmade objects constitute an important part of material culture of a society, in the research at hand they actually help to exclude these photographs; since all of these structures are clearly localized outside of the geographical confines of Afghanistan they lie beyond the region of interest.¹⁰ So, four remaining pictures are seen to be focusing on people. These are set aside in an envelope with the inscription 'Sukkur', but as can be demonstrated, this geographical information does not allow to make definitive statements about their content.

On the importance of the verbal in visual archives



They consist of postcards, two of which show perforation marks on one of the shorter edges, which might imply that they were part of a booklet of postcards from which they were ripped. The first, inscribed with 'Makrani Girls', is the easiest to process. Makran is the coastal area extending across the south of Pakistan, from the border of India in the east, to Iran in the west. The remaining three photos on the other hand leave more room for interpretation. 'A Beggar' shows a man in half profile, in front of buildings, and with features that have apparently been interpreted as 'impoverished' (long, ragged beard; torn, possibly dirty clothes). The second photo, 'A Peasant Woman', shows a woman in flowered dress and headscarf, obviously posing for the camera. The last photo, 'In the Jungle', shows the side view of a packed camel with rider, in front of which four cattle move through low growing bushes in a flat open territory. This last example depicts a nomadic lifestyle, which suggests that the classification of the picture to a clearly defined place has to be called into doubt. Already the earliest descriptions of the peoples of Afghanistan noted the extent of the migratory routes of the pastoral nomads (the Pashto 'Kutchi'), who graze in the cool areas of the central Afghan mountains during the summer and find habitation in the Baloch Plains towards the Arabian Sea in winter.¹¹ The image at hand could therefore depict Afghan nomads. Or else, if, for example, the booklet of postcards was intended to assemble the different types of peoples that can be encountered in the vicinity of Sukkur, it might well be possible that this particular picture was taken somewhere else. The mere possibility that the information depicted is equally valuable for nomadic peoples in Afghanistan, makes the labeling of this specific photograph with 'Pakistan' seem unjust.¹² In other words, other than the only possible location where this picture might have been taken (or where it was acquired) it is impossible to deduce any further analytical insights of scientific value – either from the picture itself or from the available auxiliary information.

One conclusion to be drawn from this brief – and admittedly not overly constructive – research experiment, could be that the analysis of a photograph cannot solely depend on the image and some cursory geographical classification. A scientific valuable analysis of a photograph in anthropology is dependent on additional information, which has to be collected and classified in conjunction with the image. Such auxiliary information could consist in the identity of the researcher as well as his or her research agenda and the social relationship he or she maintains with the subject depicted, including their diverse intentions, as well as the circumstances in which the photograph was produced.¹³

All photos by author, taken during his visit to Afghanistan in 2003, depicting scenes from a 'Pashtu wedding in Kabul'.

Example of an annotated photo essay – a Pashtu wedding in Kabul

The conclusions drawn from this brief archival experiment can now be applied to a small section of the collection of photographs from Afghanistan, to which I add some excerpts of my field notes. During my fieldwork in the fall of 2003 I was working with a local NGO in Kabul. Since I had often explained to my acquaintances that I was especially interested in cultural aspects of life in Kabul, I was invited one day by Dr Abdul Baseer, head and owner of the NGO, to accompany him to a wedding. Dr Baseer was a savvy businessman and fully aware of the trading value of his taking me along. He spoke very good conversational English, and that day he fulfilled multiple roles as companion, informant and translator. We were driven to Kabul's western district Kart-e Seh. After waiting some time outside the confines of the impervious mosaic of single-storied dwellings, the most honored guests (to which I as an exotic foreigner counted naturally) were invited into a meeting room. As was proudly pointed out to me, the room was not only freshly painted and decorated with new carpets, but had actually been built explicitly for this occasion. After some time of drinking tea and being served the common array of sweets (candied almonds and toffees in sparkling wrappers), the young groom, Hashmat, arrived in an obvious state of nervous agitation. From the neighboring backyard, which was hermetically sealed from view, faint music and female chanting were sounding across the high mud walls. These waves of hand-beaten drums and clatters of arm bells were building up the excitement. Upon my request, one of the richly decorated instruments was brought into the room for visual demonstration, during which time the music from beyond came to a sad halt. Questions, both concerning everyday life and politics in Kabul and specifics about marriage, were being exchanged. One of the older men with an impressively long grey beard and a large turban complained about the quality of this particular marriage: "There is no singer. There is no music. There is no dancing. We are not allowed anymore, because of Islamic Law. Obviously the wedding family is very pious...". After about two hours, the group moved to attend the blessing of the food. The subsequent meal took comparably little time, for the room had to be vacated for the less important guests. Some confusion arose as Dr Baseer and one of the more venerable Mullahs discovered that their shoes, left in front of the doorstep, were gone. "Usually, guests should be receiving gifts at weddings and not being robbed", Dr Baseer commented jokingly. Before long, the wedding party scattered into cars and started the trajectory across town towards the home of the bride in the northeastern outskirts of Kabul. During the fast ride some additional excitement was created by the bills of money that

were thrown out of the moving cars and causing many an audacious bystander to leap amongst the closely driving convoy. At the bride's place the extravagant atmosphere came to a remarkable halt. The party gathered in the visiting room, which did not seem to be especially prepared for this event. "For the bridal family, a wedding is not a joyous event because they lose a member of their family", Dr Baseer explained. We left the somewhat stiff reception only after the impenetrably veiled bride had been seated in the white wedding car. The convoy – now even more fervently – rushed back into the city's evening traffic. Back in town, near the Shar-e Now park, I was courteously released, presumably because my foreign presence would have disturbed the further proceedings of this familial event; this suited me well, because such events quite often prove to be rather exhausting experiences.

Concluding remarks

Notwithstanding visual anthropology's ardent emphasis on the value of the visual in anthropological research, my point is that photographs are hardly able to communicate valuable information by themselves. The extent to which valuable information can be read from images is dependent to a considerable degree on additional information, which very often is communicated by means other than visual. The purely visual data would have left the picture incomplete and, therefore, does not exclude the necessity to collect additional information.

Anthropological work with images therefore has to be considered as a work with the verbal and not as opposed to it. Visual anthropology, despite its focus on the visual, remains a discipline of words. On the other hand, no supply of additional information is able to exhaustively reveal the full content of an image. The answer an image gives is highly dependent on the question being asked. This means that the kind of auxiliary information that is useful cannot be decided upon without a determination of the research interest one invests in a picture. Such auxiliary information may concern the context out of which the photographs came to be, as well as the trajectory by which they found their way into an archive. Especially in archival work with visual material, this can be gainfully taken into account.

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Notes

- 1 Mead, Margaret. 2003 [1975]. 'Visual Anthropology in a Discipline of Words', in Paul Hockings (ed.) *Principles of Visual Anthropology*, p.3-10. Berlin / New York: Mouton de Gruyter (third edition). See page 4.
- 2 Eco, Umberto. 2010 [1977]. *Wie man eine wissenschaftliche Abschlussarbeit schreibt. Doktor-, Diplom- und Magisterarbeit in den Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaften*. UTB-Verlag.
- 3 Collier, John Jr. & Malcolm Collier. 1990. *Visual Anthropology. Photography as a Research Method*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press (Third paperback printing).
- 4 Bourdieu, Pierre. 1981. *Un art moyen. Essais sur les usages sociaux de la photographie*. Paris: MINUIT
- 5 Edwards, Elizabeth. 2011. 'Tracing Photography', in Marcus Banks & Jay Ruby (eds.) *Made to Be Seen*, p.159-189. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press. See page 171.
- 6 Suchar, Charles. 1989. 'The Sociological Imagination and Documentary Still Photography: The Interrogatory Stance', in Robert M. Boonzaier Flaes (ed.) *Eyes Across the Water: The Amsterdam Conference on Visual Anthropology and Sociology*, p.51-62. Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis. See page 52.
- 7 Sekula, Allan. 1991. 'Reading an Archive: Photography Between Labour and Capital', in Liz Wells (ed.) *The Photography Reader*, p.442-52. London: Routledge. See page 445.
- 8 Donati, Dario. 1997. *Ans Licht geholt. Frühe Fotografien aus dem Archiv des Völkerkundemuseums*. Zürich: Völkerkundemuseum. See page 6.
- 9 Thurnherr, Christof. 2011. 'Mehr als nur ein Augenblick', in *Tsantsa* #16, p.174-192.
- 10 136 glass slides are retained in a wooden box marked with 'Rajputana', the pre-1949 denomination of the Indian state of Rājasthān. The remaining four references lead to collections allocated to 'Sukkur', a town in southeast Pakistan.
- 11 Elphinstone, Monstuart. 1969 [1810]. *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul and its Dependencies in Persia, Tartary, and India; comprising a View of the Afghaun Nation, and a History of the Dooraunee Monarchy*. Graz, Austria: Akademische Druck - u. Verlagsanstalt. See pages 391 and 495.
- 12 Of course, if available, personal data on the original collector as can be found in travel diaries or biographies would help. As we are here dealing with postcards, such contextual information would have to include information about the original photographer. The availability of such facts is rare.
- 13 Pink, Sarah. 2001. *Doing Visual Ethnography. Images, Media and Representation in Research*. London/Thousand Oaks /New Delhi: SAGE Publications. See pages 20 and 54.